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COMMENTARY

Ongoing campaign keeps public in dark

By JOHN WICKLEIN

Every American administration, whether it be Democratic or Republican, tries to control information, once it comes into power. The Reagan administration has gone further than most in this attempt.

From its actions, it appears that the present administration distrusts any citizen who disagrees with it, and treats informed dissent as treason. The Johnson administration had much the same idea, during the Vietnam War. To such a mindset, the democratic idea that people must be allowed access to government information becomes a nuisance at best and a danger at worst.

In this administration, the invasion of Grenada was the most blatant example. The Reagan administration decided it was far better for the public to get the "correct," or Reagan, interpretation of the attack as a "rescue operation" rather than allow the attack to be covered by news reporters who would be inclined to call it what it was, an invasion of an independent nation.

To watch this administration, you would think it is seeking to set up a "guided democracy" in which the public will be allowed to know only what the administration thinks is good for it to know. That way, the people will be less inclined to question its actions. This, of course, is exactly what the founders of the country sought to avoid by writing freedom of the press and freedom of expression into our Constitution as part of the Bill of Rights.

Freedom of Information

From almost the day he took office, Ronald Reagan has acted to restrict or ban the flow of

information to the people who elected him. At first, the administration worked on bills to weaken the Freedom of Information Act — the 1966 act that allows citizens, including members of the press, to request from the government documents concerning its activities.

When Congress balked at gutting the act, the administration used another tactic. It increased the classification of documents so that they could not be made available under FOIA guidelines. This reversed a policy that presidents, Republican and Democratic, have followed since the Eisenhower Administration, to make more information, not less, available from government records.

In 1978 President Jimmy Carter signed an executive order to limit the amount of data kept from the public without justification. He ordered government officials to consider the public's right to know when they restricted access by classifying records as "secret" or "confidential." He told them that when they were in doubt, they should use the lowest classification suitable, or not classify the document at all. They should classify information, he said, only if they saw an "identifiable" danger to the national security in its release.

On April 2, 1982, President Reagan reversed this policy. He ordered officials not to consider the public's right to know when they classified information. He told them that when in doubt, they should stamp documents with the highest, not the lowest, level of secrecy. He dropped the requirement that potential damage to national security be clearly identifiable.

Taking it back

And, in a crowning piece of

paranoia, the order allowed officials to "take back" material previously released to the public — including material that has since been legally published in newspapers and magazines — and reclassify it secret.

On March 11, 1983, Reagan issued a so-called "National Security Decision Directive" that required a huge number of present and former government officials to sign an agreement for the rest of their lives.

The rationale? The administration, it says, wants to plug the leaks of secrets that could affect national security.

Admiral Stansfield Turner, former director of the CIA, says that while the CIA might legitimately ask for such a secrecy agreement from its employees, extending that requirement to officials outside the CIA "would be going too far in our democracy."

Very little information harmful to U.S. intelligence interests has been revealed, he said. In fact, intelligence agencies have complained most about information leaked by high-level government officials, including the president, when they want to justify one of their decisions or actions.

The 'secret' war

For months, high-ranking administration officials leaked information on the CIA support of the so-called "covert" war to overturn the government of Nicaragua. This activity, still officially stamped "secret," was then acknowledged publicly by the president himself. Now, of course, he has openly committed himself to overthrow of the Sandinista government.

Under the 1983 order, none of these people would be able to write about government policy concerning Nicaragua after they left office unless they let future administrations censor what they have written. Obviously Henry Kissinger, who was briefed on "covert" activity in Nicaragua as head of the Central American Commission, will

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have to submit all future writings to censorship by whatever administration is in power — even if it is a Democratic administration. That is going to be fun to watch.

The administration has taken its campaign of suppression into academia, as well. To try to restrict the flow of scientific information to the Soviet Union, it reinterpreted international trade regulations to ban the exchange of *unclassified* information with foreign scientists, or its use in classroom lectures where foreign students were present.

Attorney Floyd Abrams, in an article in The New York Times Magazine, said that various universities have received letters from the State Department and the Commerce Department suggesting that ordinary teaching of unclassified materials may be considered "export" within the meaning of laws barring the export of secret technology. Thus, the letters said, universities teaching such information might be subject to civil or even criminal penalties.

Universities protest

The presidents of M.I.T., Cal Tech, Cornell and the University of California protested the change in a letter to the administration:

"Restricting the free flow of information among scientists and engineers would alter fundamentally the system that produced the science and technology that the Government is now trying to protect, and leave us with nothing to protect in the very near future."

Last November, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger signed a directive to prevent public disclosure of technical information with military or space applications. The order covered work done for the Pentagon by universities, including unclassified technical information. Defense Department research contracts with universities routinely include nondisclosure clauses, and this, too, is cause for concern for people worried about academic freedom.

Clearly, a case can be made for protecting some secrets of the military and intelligence agencies. But to classify everything that might conceivably affect the country's standing violates a basic premise on which the country was built: that the people have the right to free speech and the right to be informed.

A debased term

The term "protect the national security" itself has at times been distorted into a propaganda phrase.

Richard Nixon used it to justify the Watergate cover-up. The military regimes in Brazil, Argentina and El Salvador used it to justify killings in their dirty wars against their own people. The Soviet Union uses it to explain why it won't allow Jewish dissidents to leave the country. The Reagan Administration is using it to justify keeping information about its activities from the American public.

The term has become debased coin. In a democracy, its use to deny the people their right to know is unacceptable.

(This column was excerpted from John Wicklein's March 2 address at a University of Colorado colloquium on "The Press and the Public." Wicklein, who was formerly with the New York Times and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, teaches journalism at Ohio State University.)